

Donna Breckenridge

Springville, Utah: A Certified Local Government

A small group of Mormon pioneers founded Springville, Utah, in September 1850. The town evolved into a bustling rural center until the turn of the century, when the railroad went through and changed the nature of its economy from agricultural to commercial. By the 1930s, Springville was known as “a town of contractors.” Through the next few decades, it earned

the nickname Art City for its support of the arts. Today, it has a population of 19,000 and is considered by many to be a “bedroom community” to Provo which lies five miles to the north.

Once the pioneers emerged from the protection of their fort, they laid out a city of 64 square blocks divided by (for the most part) wide straight streets. Each block contained four acres, with a house, barn, and garden on each acre. Although the city today has expanded far beyond the original plat, a few log cabins and barns remain to remind viewers of its rural roots. The booming economy of the years between 1890 and 1920 resulted in a great many 1 1/2 story brick homes being built. The presence of contractors, architects, and artists ensured a variety of styles and designs of buildings.

Springville residents have always been proud of their homes and heritage. Many older homes are currently housing third and fourth generation descendants of the original owner. A Tree Committee has documented and plaqued historic trees, and citizens have compiled an annual Community Progress report for many years, detailing events and capturing with photos many of the buildings in town. Two notable histories of the town have also been written. For the past 70 or so years, the Art City Days celebration has been held in June with a variety of contests, games, exhibitions, and a parade. It was during Art City Days in the 1970s that the first tours of historic homes were sponsored by individuals with a love for their town.

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) commissioned a reconnaissance survey in the early 1980s. In 1985, Springville City Council members, including Delora Bertelsen, who is now in her second term as mayor, established the Springville Historic Preservation commission as part of the Certified Local Government (CLG) program. This was in response to the efforts of the Tree Committee and the historical society to document existing historical structures, and to try to preserve buildings that were in danger of being demolished. The city council also saw the advantage of bringing federal tax money back into the town to do this.

The Springville Historic Preservation Commission began with an annual grant of \$5,000, which was matched by volunteer time and



The before and after views of the 1892 Kearns Hotel in Springville, UT, illustrate the transformation of this key community landmark. The building was brought up to code and rehabilitated according to NPS standards. Today, it serves as a highly rated hotel. In 1991, it received a Utah Heritage Foundation award. Photos by Donna Breckenridge.



the City itself. Over the years, the grant has grown to \$15,000, to be spent over a 16-month period and is matched in cash entirely by the City. One of the first tasks of the CLG was to commission a researcher to begin intensive level surveys based on the earlier reconnaissance survey, and this activity has been ongoing until today 56 buildings have been documented at this level. Two homes and the Museum of Art were listed in the National Register of Historic Places prior to 1985 [by interested individuals]. The CLG has since nominated eight more to the National Register and is currently working on a group nomination of 16 buildings.

The Heritage Homes Tours, which had been a popular part of Art City Days, was expanded in 1987 to four free bus tours lasting about 1-1/2 hours each. By 1993, the CLG ran nine tours, and the Art City Days Committee paid all expenses. Since the early tours always concluded at the Community Presbyterian Church, with the ladies serving lemonade and sponsoring a bake-sale, a walking tour of the Hungerford Academy (Presbyterian) block was introduced, featuring the church, dormitories, and manse (the school itself was demolished in 1913).

When the Art City Days Committee began spotlighting a local artist, the Heritage Homes Tours included their place of residence or provided a historic building for their use during that week. In 1994, the CLG discontinued the bus tours and has since provided in-home tours of from 13 to 18 buildings. The owners conduct the tours, and the CLG provides foot-coverings (blue hospital slippers) and silk-screened banners to mark the residence. Although the CLG now charges a nominal fee, with the proceeds going to further research, this change has proved to be a popular one. Five or six homes are open for three afternoons, so a person can visit all the homes if desired.

In conjunction with the tours, the CLG prepares pamphlets describing the buildings, and distributes them to the Museum of Art, the City Office Building, the Chamber of Commerce, the newspaper office, local motels, and those taking the tours. These are useful not only for Art City Days, but also for visitors throughout the year.

A local preservation ordinance was passed in 1989, part of which allows for the recognition of historic sites and landmarks. Each year, the CLG nominates buildings for this honor, and prepares and presents certificates or bronze plaques at a city council meeting during National Historic Preservation Week in May. A slide presentation often accompanies the nominations, and of course, prior permission from the owners is always obtained.

The downtown area of Springville has unfortunately not fared as well as private residences in the city. The brick buildings date mainly from 1892 to 1925, with a few stores from the 1950s. At some point in time, nearly all the owners decided to paint the facades white with black trim. The problem was compounded in the 1970s by the addition of metal mansard-style awnings. To highlight the historic architecture still visible in this area, the CLG ran a "Can You Identify This Architecture?" contest in the local weekly newspaper. Each week for four weeks, four different photos of details in the downtown area were shown. These included such things as decorative mosaic tiles, the tops of facade columns, and roof lines (with appropriate clues if needed). This contest generated a lot of interest, and the winner received a very nice clock donated by the owners of a gift store.

At the same time, the Main Street program was introduced to the City Council and residents. Unfortunately, they have not yet taken any positive steps in this direction. Part of the problem stems from absentee landlords who charge low rents for dilapidated and deteriorating buildings and facilities. This, in turn, causes a high rate of turn-over in businesses. There is also a perceived lack of parking, although this has been alleviated somewhat by the addition of a parking lot off a back lane and a walk-through to the main street.

Several large commercial buildings have recently been purchased and are in the process of being restored and revitalized. The Kearns Hotel (built 1892 and which had been a bus stop before it was abandoned) has been restored as a top-rate hotel by architect Craig Lott. The Senior Hotel (built 1900 and most recently used as a beer parlor) is under renovation as a hotel and dining room, and the H.T. Reynolds Department Store (built 1892 and used by cafes and aerobics classes) has been purchased by Gary Price, a sculptor, and will be used to house a restaurant, art gallery, and studio.

The City has cooperated in these efforts by restoring two city-owned buildings—the Carnegie Library and a building which was originally the workshop of the old high school and which is now used by theater groups, artists, and visitors arriving from foreign countries for the International Folkfest. The Carnegie Library has been listed in the National Register and, while some of the work is done by volunteers, much of the restoration is funded by "brick and mortar" grants from the CLG. This building currently houses a pioneer museum, the Historical Society, and the Historic Preservation Commission, with one large meeting room rented out for various purposes.

The bulk of the grant money has, for the past several years, been spent on the restoration of private and public buildings. First, a predevelopment survey is conducted by a professional architect. He lists and prioritizes the problems and suggests an approximate cost. The CLG then allocates an appropriate amount of money, gets bids, hires the best craftsmen, supervises the work, and pays the bill after the SHPO approves the finished work. The CLG has a waiting list of owners and all this is done with their cooperation. To date, thousands of dollars have been spent on wooden Queen Anne shingles, brick cleaning and sealing, mortar and roof repair, window restoration, repair and replacement of tile and concrete columns, updating plumbing and electrical lines, and repairing water damage. Homeowners are now required to agree to maintain the premises after the CLG has given them grant money.

Not all older homes are currently being used as residences. One home is now a funeral parlor, and what was once a funeral home is now a private residence. A large home serves as a law office and two more are antique stores. The Baptist Church had its bell-tower removed and is now a residence. On the front porch is a picture of the church as it once looked. The Springville Garage is

still a garage, minus the pumps out front but still run by the son of the man who built it in 1920. One old post office is a day-care center.

Another project that the CLG undertook was that of photographing the old (1930s, 1950s, and 1970s) photos kept at the County Assessors Office. Over the years, nearly a thousand photos were duplicated, and the project was only half done when the County CLG took over the project by scanning the photos into a computer. Springville was also the home of the photographer George Edward Anderson (1860-1928), to whom we owe much documentation on the growth of Utah. Thousands of glass negatives were preserved and donated to the library at Brigham Young University.

The CLG in Springville has been extremely fortunate. Not only has the city government been willing to match the federal grant with cash and participate in the program by restoring its own buildings, but private individuals have maintained their own homes and histories, and everyone has worked together to preserve the rich heritage that is theirs.

Donna Breckenridge is a former member of the Springville, Utah Historic Preservation Commission.



The Big Sink Rural Historic District, Woodford County, KY, was documented as part of a historic survey of cultural resources in Northern Kentucky. Funded through a Historic Preservation Fund grant to the State Historic Preservation Office, the survey documented the predominantly agricultural landscape that conveys the history of the central Bluegrass region of the state. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places, this district illustrates how human history—evident in family farm tenure and commitment to an agricultural economy—is closely linked with natural resources and geologic formations. Photo by Christine Amos for the Kentucky Heritage Council.